

CSAP Center for
Substance Abuse
Prevention

SOUTHWEST
CAPT

APPLYING PREVENTION THAT WORKS!

*"Let us put our minds together and see
what kind of life we can make for our children."*

Sitting Bull

All of us need strong positive relationships, a sense of bonding, social support, and a belief that we can influence our environments. For over a decade, prevention efforts have relied heavily upon the risk and protective factors approach. The thrust behind this approach is to develop strategies to reduce or eliminate negative influences such as peer pressure, low level of community attachment, rebelliousness, etc. This approach heavily favors identification of "at-risk" or "high risk" individuals and the many dangers and stressors that lead to delinquency, destruction and failure. Critics have pointed out that these efforts consistently under-emphasize protective factors. While there are many merits to risk factors research,



there is promising evidence that promoting the protective factors, or assets, in a child's life can effectively buffer her from the risks.

Prevention research indicates that it takes only one parent, one

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teacher, or one community member to provide the experiences that make a profound difference in a child's life. Further, a community can enhance proven assets to promote health and well being in its youth. In their pursuit of risk factor data,



researchers made a fascinating discovery: in the face of even severe conditions, some children manage to develop stable, healthy personalities. They adjust to sustained life stress. Clearly, individuals within high-risk environments are not equally vulnerable. Many researchers have shifted their focus to discovering what is "right" with these children. What makes them less vulnerable to risk?

The "protective factors" or "assets" approach calls for shifting attention away from a concentration on stopping or preventing problems to increasing young people's exposure to the positive and constructive activities known to promote healthy, responsible, and compassionate choices. Protective factor research provides the raw material needed for prevention strategies that can help even seriously stressed children and families. Today, researchers such as Hawkins and Catalano, Peter Bensen, Bonnie Benard, and others continue to scrutinize the conditions and attributes present in the lives of so many

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remarkable
children
who emerge
unscathed

from seemingly devastating environments.

We will have little success in “fixing the problems” until we look under them to discover the conditions and attributes contributing to those problems in the first place. Which protective factors, or assets, might we strengthen to shield children from negative influences? Communities must actively assess their situations and pay special, consistent attention to youth.

What are the characteristics of children who fare well in the face of environmental stresses?

What is a resilient child? Resilient children have been summed up as those who “work

well, play well, love well, and expect well” (Garmezy, cited in Benard, 1991).

- They are socially competent (i.e., responsive, flexible, empathic, communicative, capable of humor).
- They show good problem-solving skills.
- They have a strong sense of their own identity and exert some control over their environments.
- They have healthy expectations, and can envision a positive future (Benard, 1991).

How can we foster these qualities in our children?

Each environment in which children interact can play a part in fostering resiliency, by providing certain protective factors in their lives. These factors help children become resilient, whether they are provided in the context of the family, the school, or the community. Broadly described, protective factors consist of the following.

Caring and Support

Children need close, loving relationships with dependable adults. These relationships may be with parents, a special teacher, or an adult friend or mentor. Caring, support, and affection protect children in a very special way.

High Expectations

Children need to know that the adults around them believe in their abilities. They need to understand important values such as achievement and education. Research demonstrates that when schools expect and support student achievement, students have higher rates of

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academic success. Sometimes all it takes is one person to make all the difference to a child. A June, 1999 Parents magazine survey of successful women found they all had one thing in common: *a father who believed in them.*

Participation and Involvement

Like adults, children need to feel needed. Their participation in family, school, and community should be meaningful and require responsibility toward others. Making a contribution to something larger than ourselves prevents the sense of alienation which hallmarks destructive behaviors such as delinquency or suicide. We must look for strategies that provide these experiences for all children. Moving beyond a problem orientation requires that schools and communities link with children and their families, including them in all phases of developmental planning and implementation. This level of inclusion challenges our assumptions

about
sharing
power within
systems;



but is itself a protective factor for youth, and all community members as well.

The Search Institute has identified 40 developmental assets which promote healthy personal development and are classified in the following broad categories:

External assets

- Support
- Empowerment
- Boundaries & Expectations
- Constructive Use of Time

Internal assets

- Commitment to Learning
- Positive Values
- Social Competencies
- Positive Identity

While the risk and protective factors approach has shown some success when employed in selective and indicated prevention programs, the assets approach is emerging as a strategy for reaching universal prevention populations. (For more information on selective, indicated

and universal strategies, see Science Based Practices in Substance Abuse Prevention: A Guide.) This approach focuses on adding or enhancing strengths or assets, rather than reducing or eliminating risks. It focuses on all youth in a community, and does not single out, or label, anyone as "at-risk" or "high risk."

According to the Search Institute, a major reason we confront so many youth crises is that society no longer provides youth with the developmental infrastructure (the assets) they need to grow up healthy. In fact, the average teenager has only about 16 of the 40 assets (Search, 1995). Far too many young people don't have the influences and opportunities they require to develop healthy outlooks. This depletion of assets exists, regardless of class, race or religion.

Research shows that the 40 developmental assets help young people make wise decisions, choose positive paths and grow up competent, caring and responsible. Protective factor research tells us that shifting the balance from vulnerability to resilience may happen as a result of one person or one opportunity. That is, individuals who have succeeded in spite of adverse conditions have often done so because of the presence of support in the form of one family member, one teacher or one community person that encouraged their

success and welcomed their participation. Either way, resilient youth have fewer problems with drugs, violence, sexual involvement, and depression when there are positive factors in their lives. Furthermore, they experience greater success in school and volunteer more often to help other people.

All youth benefit from reduced risks. Youth-at-risk or high risk also benefit from beefing up strengths or assets. Consider the two approaches as complementary, and not competing, means to the same end - an environment that is safe, healthy and drug-free.

For Further Reading

- Benard, B. (1991). *Fostering Resiliency in Kids: Protective Factors in the Family, School, and Community*. Portland, OR: Western Center for Drug-Free Schools and Communities.
- Building Assets for Youth - Search Institute from February 1994, Youth Update newsletter *What Is a Resilient Child?* Brounstein, P.J., Zweig, J.M. and Gardner, S.E. (1998). *Science based practices in substance abuse prevention: A guide*. Located at www.miph.org/capt/sbp_bg.1.html#science
- *Communities That Care. Risk Focused Prevention, Using The Social Development Strategy*. Available through DRP, Inc., 130 Nickerson, Suite 107, Seattle WA 98109. Phone (800) 736-2630 / Fax (206) 286-1462.